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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 001953

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [GOI](#) [INTERNAL](#) [GAZA](#) [DISENGAGEMENT](#) [ISRAELI](#) [PALESTINIAN](#) [AFFAIRS](#)

SUBJECT: SHARON'S LIKUD REFERENDUM LIKELY TO STYMIE
WITHDRAWAL OPPONENTS

REF: A. TEL AVIV 1941

[1](#)B. TEL AVIV 1906

[1](#)C. TEL AVIV 1741

[1](#)D. TEL AVIV 808

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel Kurtzer for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: PM Sharon's decision to take his unilateral disengagement plan to a referendum of the full 200,000-strong Likud membership, a body more moderate than its leadership, reinforces his hand in dealing with Likud and other-party ministers and Knesset members who oppose withdrawal. The action also staves off for the anticipated six-week referendum preparation period any leftist or other demands for visible action toward withdrawal, and leaves Sharon time both to pursue USG assurances and to build a public relations bulwark against possible indictment on bribery charges (reftels). In the unlikely event that the Likud referendum goes against his plan, Sharon will be able to say that he made every effort to work for peace and security. If he wins by a narrow margin, Sharon could put off both the immense logistical challenge of settlement dismantlement by calling for a national referendum, a process that would require new legislation and would eat up additional months before the first settler leaves Gaza. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) Sharon's 14 Likud cabinet ministers and the remaining nine other-party ministers are clearly divided, with positions ranging from full support for withdrawal, to support with major conditions attached, to solid opposition (Ref C). Among Likud ministers and Knesset members, a solid show of rank-and-file Likud support would be extraordinarily difficult to ignore, as noted by Likud Education Minister and withdrawal opponent Limor Livnat right after Sharon's announcement of the party referendum.

[1](#)3. (C) A Likud referendum also allows the rightist coalition parties, the National Union and the National Religious Party, to put off their threatened departures from the coalition, and a pro-withdrawal vote could well prompt them to realize that an ever more confident Sharon will be justifiably deaf to their threats. Among Labor, such a Likud vote is likely to convince at least some of the many skeptical rank and file and party leaders that Sharon means business, thus providing the political cover for a Likud/Labor unity government (Ref A).

[1](#)4. (C) Among the broader public, the referendum will likely confirm polls showing widespread support for Gaza withdrawal and solidify Sharon's reputation as the only Israeli leader capable of taking such a step. Observers say those points are likely to be factors in both Attorney General Mazuz's possible indictment considerations, and the public's support for even a corruption-tainted prime minister (Refs B and C). An opinion poll published March 31 by the major daily "Yedioth Ahronoth," and a separate internal Likud survey both show that, even before any Sharon public relations campaign, 51 percent of Likud members who would take part in the referendum would support his disengagement plan.

[1](#)5. (C) Sharon need be in no hurry to finalize a withdrawal plan, although he will need to manage the "outcomes" of his visit to Washington in mid-April. The acts of negotiating with Washington and conducting broad-based referenda maintain him in the public eye as an engaged, strong, confident leader, and dissipate pressure to address the bribery allegations, both those of the Greek island affair, for which the state attorney has recommended indictment, and those in the parallel Cyril Kern affair that await state attorney recommendations. They also allow him to put off both the immensely difficult logistical task of actually withdrawing from settlements, and his possibly even more difficult ideological about-face from 37 years of hard-driving support for settlements. Accordingly, Sharon could well determine some months from now, once a Likud referendum is out of the way, that he needs to go to a national referendum on withdrawal as well, a process that would require new legislation and eat up additional months before the first settler leaves Gaza.

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